

THE ANCIENT CAVES OF SZECHWAN PROVINCE, CHINA

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In the Province of Szechwan, in the western part of China, there are thousands of artificial caves. (Figs. 1, 2, 3.) They have been chiseled out of solid sandstone on the sides of hills and cliffs, and are found all the way from Hupeh Province on the east to the highlands of the Szechwan-Tibetan border. There are also similar caves along the Yellow River, in the Province of Kansu.¹

The caves are usually found in steep places, both singly and in groups. Many are difficult of access. They vary in depth from a few feet to 130 feet, and are generally about 6 feet wide and 6 feet high on the inside. The floors, sides, and tops are the solid stone out of which the caves have been carved. The marks of the

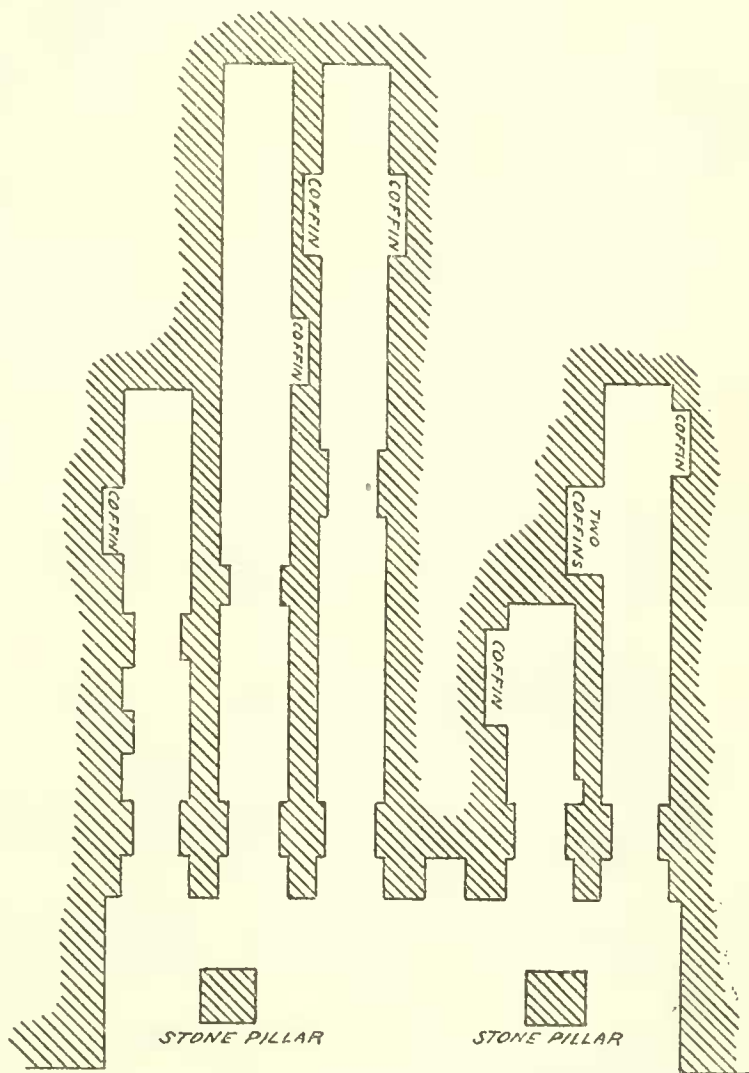


FIGURE 1.—Floor plan of a six-chamber cave, carved from the stone cliffs near Kiating. Native rock pillars have been left in the common entrance. Length, 130 feet; breadth, 54 feet

chisels can plainly be seen. Some caves are so close together that holes have been knocked through the walls that separated them. Excepting

¹ Bishop, C. W., *The problem of the Min River caves*, p. 1. Reprinted by the Peking Express Press from *The Chinese Social and Political Science Review*, vol. 10, no. 1, Peking, January, 1926.

in a few instances where steps have been made in the rock, there are no special approaches to the caves; the typical entrance is simply a square hole or door in the solid rock. While the best caves have elaborate carvings, which are above and around the front openings, or on the sides and pillars near the entrances, most of the caves have no carvings at all.

The popular belief is that these caves, called *mantsu dong*, or barbarian caves, were made and used as dwellings by aborigines who

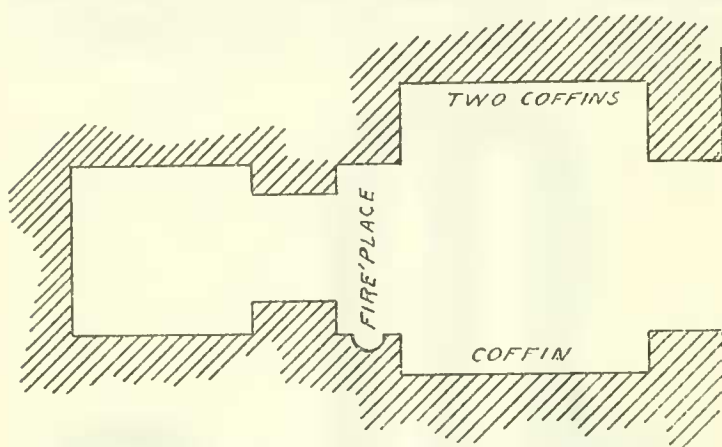


FIGURE 2.—Plan of a cave near Kiating. Length, 25 feet; width at rear, 6 feet

inhabited Szechwan Province before the arrival of the Chinese. There is increasing evidence, however, that they are Chinese tombs, and that they were constructed for burial purposes in the Han dynasty (206 B. C.–220 A. D.), and possibly during the early years of the Three Kingdoms. The

belief of the Chinese that the caves of Szechwan were aboriginal dwellings is probably due to the fact that the Chinese population of Szechwan Province was practically exterminated by Tsang Shien

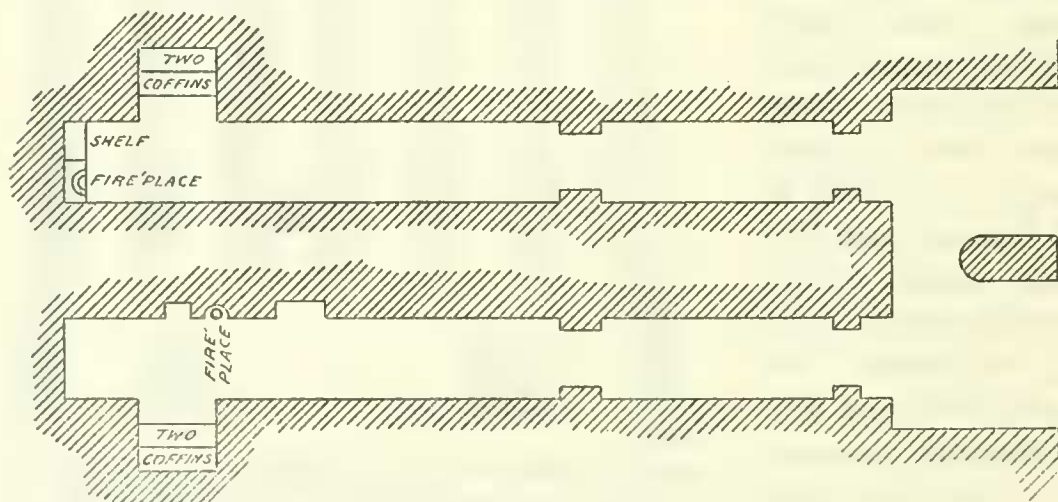


FIGURE 3.—Plan of double cave near Kiating. Total length, 61 feet; width of entrance, 21 feet

Tsong near the close of the Ming dynasty. The new immigrants naturally knew little about the past history of the Province.

There is reliable evidence that the Chinese took possession of Chengtu, the capital of the Province, about 300 B. C., and later extended their territory westward and southward. Monuments at

Yachow and near Lushan show conclusively that during the later Han dynasty the Chinese were in possession of Yachow. Kiating was in the hands of the Chinese during the Han dynasty, but for centuries after Christ the highlands west of Suifu, between the Yangtse and the Min Rivers, were under control of the aborigines. Suifu was a difficult place for the Chinese to take and occupy, and still more difficult to protect from the raids of the mantsus (barbarians) who lived in the mountains not far away. Chu Ko Liang, the famous Chinese warrior, placed a garrison in Suifu in 225 A. D. For centuries afterwards the city and surrounding country were included in the Kien Wei district and were governed either from Kien Wei or from Nan Ch'i. The Suifu history states that the whole Kien Wei district, which included the Suifu prefecture, was an aboriginal country, although governed by Chinese officials who lived in Kien Wei. The name Yong Cheo, or Mantsu Town, though later replaced by various other designations, and finally by Hsu Cheo Fu, has tended to cling to the city of Suifu until the present day.

If the aborigines made and lived in the Szechwan caves, the Suifu district should abound in them, for it has plenty of sandstone. Also, Suifu was one of the mantsu centers and was probably the last large city in Szechwan to be taken from the aborigines by the Chinese. There should be fewer caves near Chengtu, Kiating, and Yachow. But the fact is that at Suifu there are only four or five very small caves, while there are many near Yachow and Chengtu, and near Kiating there are probably thousands of them. So far as the writer has been able to learn, there are no similar artificial caves in Kweichow or Yunnan, or even in Tibet, where there are still large numbers of mantsus or aborigines. The caves of Szechwan are found in the territory occupied by the Chinese during the Han dynasty and at the beginning of the Three Kingdoms. Those in Kansu Province are reported to be along the Yellow River, in a territory that was probably inhabited by the Chinese centuries before Christ.

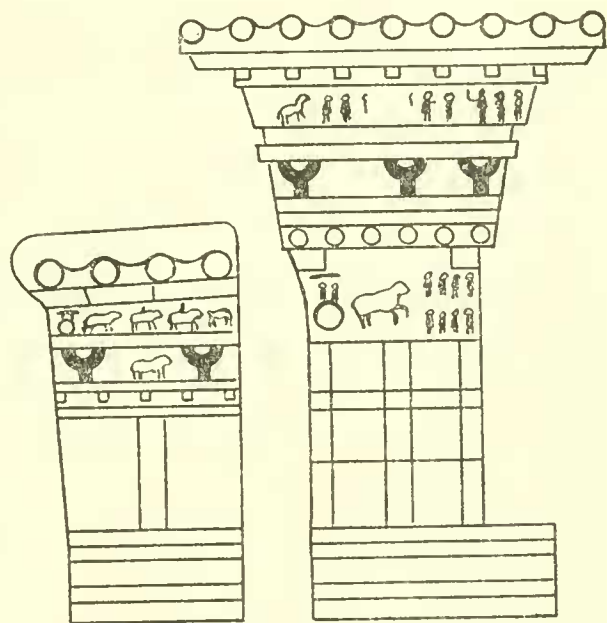


FIGURE 4.—Schematic drawing of the south side of a Han dynasty memorial arch near Yachow. Height about 25 feet

Near Yachow is a memorial arch, about 25 feet high, whose inscriptions show beyond doubt that it was erected in the later Han dynasty. It has elaborate carvings (fig. 4), which give an excellent basis for comparison with the carvings in the caves. In the public museum of Chengtu there are artifacts which were taken from Han dynasty graves on the Chengtu plain. Another interesting collec-



FIGURE 5.—A tile roof edge forms a decorative motif frequently found in caves throughout Szechwan Province

tion, secured in the Szechwan caves, is preserved in the museum of the West China Union University.

In the historic museums of Peiping are many artifacts (some of which are from Han dynasty graves) dating from the Manchu dynasty back to the very beginnings of Chinese history. The Field Museum in Chicago, Ill., has a collection of articles from Han dynasty graves in eastern China. The Smithsonian Institution has nearly two hundred artifacts, mostly fragmentary, collected by the writer in the caves of Szechwan Province. The writer has visited the memorial arch at Yachow, the museums mentioned above, and many of the caves of Szechwan, and this article is largely the result of his impressions.²

The most common design used in the Szechwan caves is a

decoration consisting of a series of circles, bridged by quarter circles resembling new moons. These are also conspicuous on the Han dynasty monument at Yachow and on memorial arches, shrines, temples, and even ordinary buildings throughout Szechwan Province. The same design probably occurs all over China, for it resembles the edge of a tile roof, the circles representing the ends of round beams

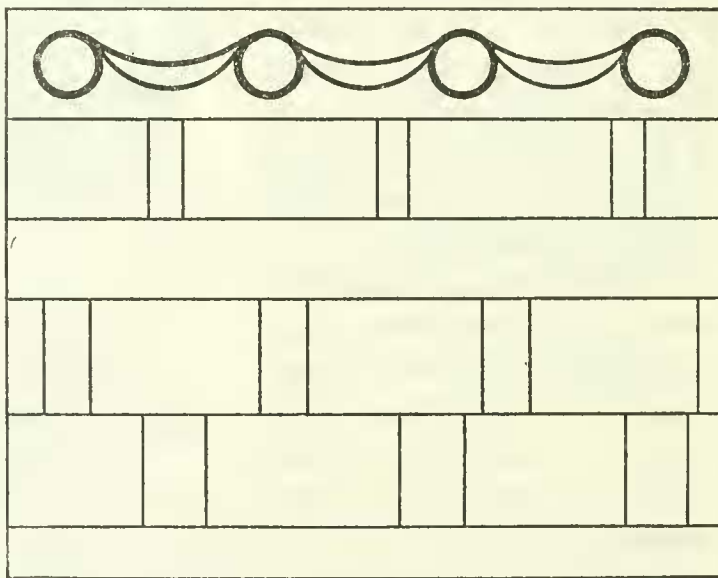


FIGURE 6.—This carving on the wall of a cave-tomb near Kiating portrays the side of a tile-roofed house

² The writer gladly acknowledges his indebtedness to Rev. Thomas Torrance and to Prof. Daniel Sheets Dye, of the West China Union University, both of whom have studied the Szechwan caves; also to Dr. Walter Hough, head curator, department of anthropology, and Nell M. Judd, curator of archeology, both of the U. S. National Museum, for their invaluable assistance in the preparation of this article.

or poles; the part circles, curved tiles such as are used throughout China. (Figs. 5, 6; pl. 14.)

Another common design observed in the caves is the brace, which is found in two forms. First is the half brace, employed as follows: When, in a building or on a memorial arch, the space between two upright posts is bridged by a long beam of wood or stone on which rests a heavy weight, half braces are often brought out from the uprights to strengthen the crossbeam. (Fig. 7.)

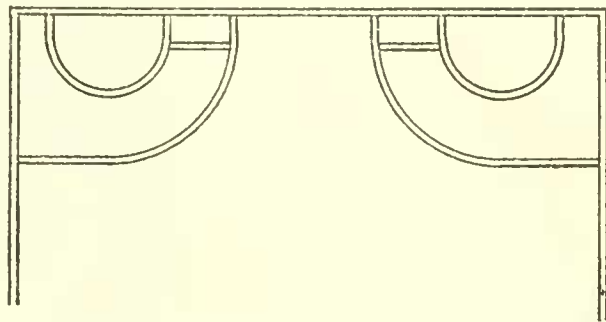


FIGURE 7.—Schematic drawing from a cave near Kiating, showing the type of half brace frequently seen in later Chinese buildings and memorial arches. Width, about 5 feet

These half braces, occasionally seen as ornamental

carvings in the caves, are very common in Chinese architecture, and especially in buildings and on memorial arches.

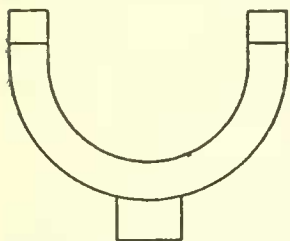


FIGURE 8.—A simple type of ancient Chinese brace

The regular or full brace in its simplest form somewhat resembles the letter U. (Fig. 8.) When a crossbeam bears up a heavy load, and is likely to break, another crossbeam may be placed a little way below, and several of the braces fitted between the two beams. This adds to the upper beam the strength of the lower beam. Many of these braces are carved as ornaments in the Szechwan caves (fig. 9);

several occur on the Han dynasty monument at Yachow. The writer has seen many more, some of which are elaborate in design, on memorial arches and in Chinese buildings, both in Szechwan Province and in Peiping. (Figs. 10, 11.)

In a cave near the great Buddha at Kiating there is a carving of a chariot drawn by a man. In the public museum at Chengtu there are two bricks from

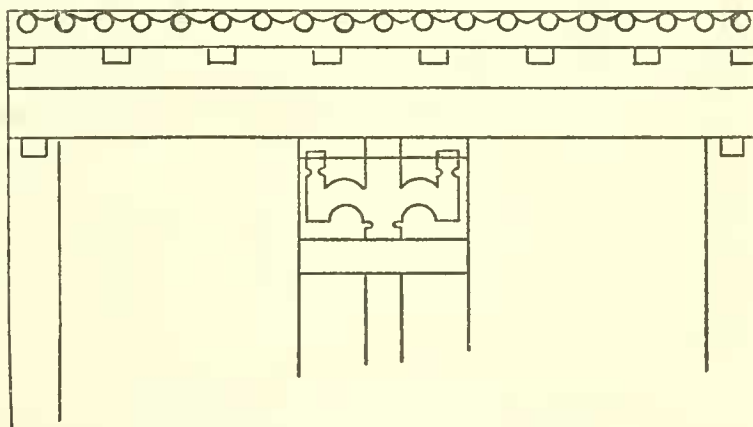


FIGURE 9.—Carved entrance to the double cave near Kiating. (See fig. 3 for plan.) Note representations of the tile roof and brace on central column

a Han dynasty grave on the Chengtu plain, on each of which is the design of a chariot pulled by a horse. These two chariots are similar

in shape. Three Han dynasty chariots of this kind are illustrated by S. W. Bushell in "Chinese Art."³ Some of the chariots represented on the Han dynasty arch at Yachow are of a different type and closely resemble the one pictured in "Outlines of Chinese

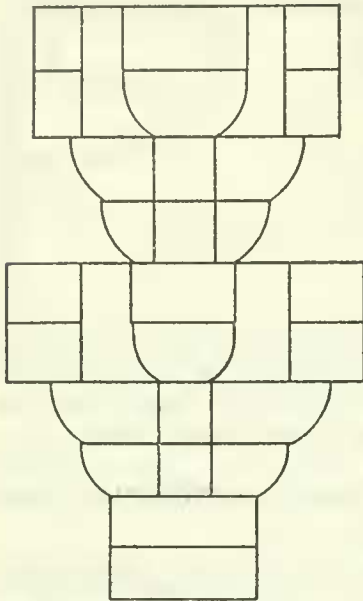


FIGURE 10.—Diagram of a brace made of bricks. Eight such braces hold up each story of the old Sulfu pagoda

History" by Li Ung Bing.⁴ Apparently both types mentioned above were common in China during the Han dynasty. The history of the Three Kingdoms frequently mentions chariots in Szechwan Province and in other parts of China.

In two different caves near Kiating are carvings which represent, respectively, a house (fig. 12) and the roof of a similar building (fig. 13). Both resemble modern Chinese houses, especially in the upturned ends of the roofs.

In determining by whom and for what purposes the caves of Szechwan were made, the artifacts actually found in the caves are of primary importance. Are they Chinese or aboriginal? Are they such as are found in homes or in tombs?

Rev. Thomas Torrance, who has studied the Szechwan caves for years and was the first to assert that they were of Chinese origin, gives the following list of their contents:

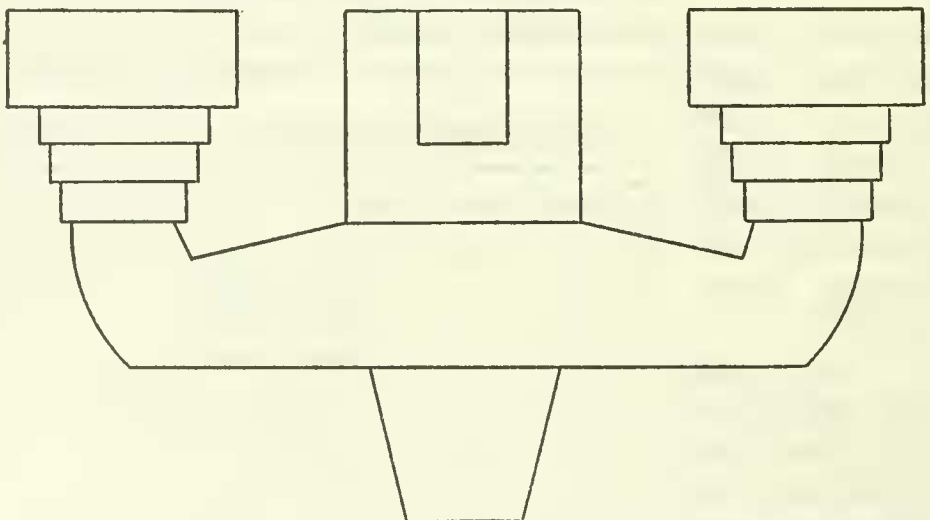


FIGURE 11.—Brace found at each side of a cave ten li west of Kiating.

Instead of straw or movable wooden figures of men you find them of burnt clay, gray and terra cotta in color, glazed and unglazed, from a few inches

³ Bushell, S. W., *Chinese Art*, vol. 1, opposite p. 26, published in London under the authority of the Board of Education, 1924.

⁴ Bing, Li Ung, *Outlines of Chinese history*, p. 36, Commercial Press, Shanghai, 1914.

high to nearly full life-size. They represent persons of both sexes and various ranks and callings. There are besides models of houses, cooking pots, boilers, rice steamers, bowls, basins, vases, trays, jars, lamps, musical instruments, dogs, cats, horses, cows, sheep, fowls, ducks, etc. Standing with your reflector lamp in the midst of a large cave it seems verily an imitation of Noah's ark.⁵

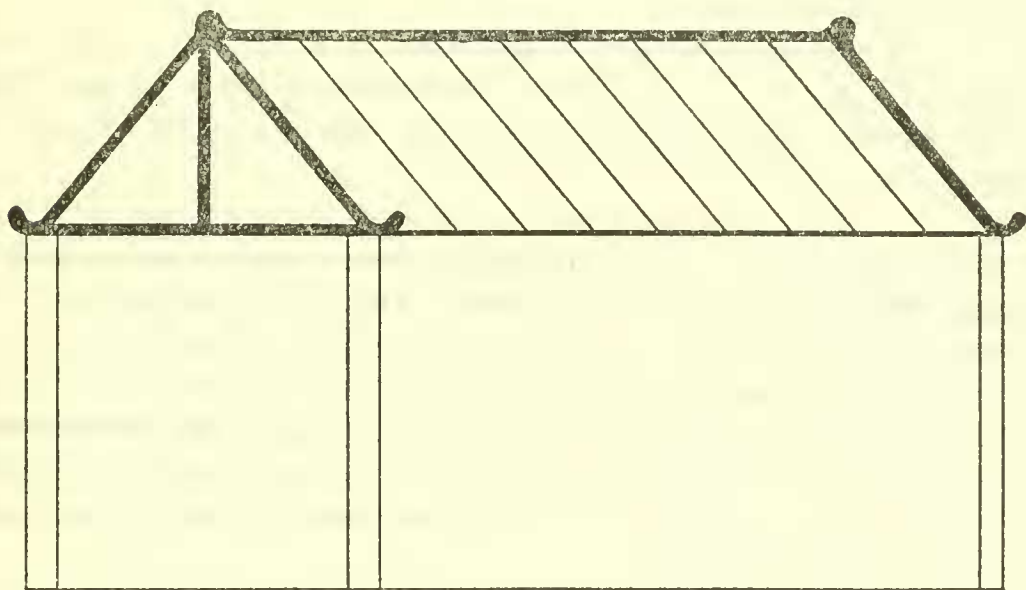


FIGURE 12.—Chiseled on the wall of a cave near Kiating is this representation of a house (slightly idealized)

The following are among the burnt-clay figures, mostly unglazed, secured by the writer in the Szechwan caves, and now in the United States National Museum. (The accompanying numbers are U.S.N.M. catalogue numbers.)

Plate 1, *b*, illustrates a fragment of an elephant's foot (No. 342202). In the public museum at Chengtu is an unglazed artifact, taken from a Han dynasty grave on the Chengtu plain, on which are several images of elephants, very artistically designed. We have historical evidence that elephants were known in Szechwan during the early Christian centuries. An aborigine chief is said to have ridden an elephant in a battle against Chu Ko Liang, and the saint, P'u Hsien, now worshiped as a god, is said to have ridden an elephant to Mount Omei.

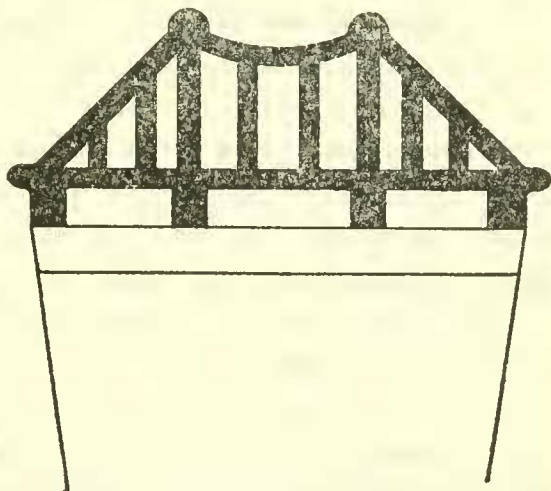


FIGURE 13.—Representation of a house roof, carved on a stone pillar in a cave-tomb near Kiating

⁵ Journal of the North-China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, vol. 41, p. 68. Kelly and Walsh, Shanghai, 1910.

One fragment is the neck of a large bottle or flask with the figure of a person clinging to it. (Pl. 2, *a*; No. 341358.) It is covered with green glaze, and the orifice was molded over a stick or other cylindrical object. It should be noted that glazed figures are rare in the caves of Szechwan.

A second specimen bearing green glaze is a fragment of a bell or drum. (Pl. 2, *b*; No. 341373.) The shape appears to have been similar to the Chou dynasty drums in the Confucian Temple at Peiping.

Fowls are frequently represented among the clay offerings from the Szechwan caves. Among others in our collection is the image of a duck, supported by a circular base. (Pl. 3, *a*; No. 342189.) On the back is what resembles a small pot or vessel with a flat top.

Chickens are frequently represented by the images found in the caves of Szechwan Province. Perhaps none is more characteristic than that shown in Plate 3, *b*, which represents a mother hen with one baby chicken on her back and three others peeping from under her breast. (No. 341385.)

The dog also provided a favorite theme for the ancient sculptors of Szechwan. Three such images are included in the series under consideration. One is merely a head fragment (pl. 4, *a*; No. 341346); another is the erect head and right foreleg of an animal at rest (pl. 4, *b*; No. 341335); while the third is the well-modeled body of a dog from which the head is missing (pl. 4, *c*; No. 342207). In the case of the first two, both have flat noses and short, alert ears. Of the numerous similar images examined by the writer, from the Szechwan caves and from Chinese tombs dated in the Han dynasty, only one had a pointed nose. Flat or pug noses, short ears, and tails curled up over their backs are common characteristics of dog figures from both the Szechwan caves and the Han dynasty graves.

The image of the headless dog is especially interesting. Its tail curls up over the back in true pug fashion. Harness is represented by a collar around the neck and by a belt. These are joined together at the back of the neck by a ring to which, presumably, a rope might be tied. Several similar images having this type of leash have been noted in various collections by the present writer.

Our series includes several fragments of horses' heads and hoofs, most of which are very artistically modeled. (Pl. 1, *a*, No. 341411; pl. 1, *c*, No. 341381.) To judge from these fragments and from other specimens seen in West China, horses of the Szechwan cave period were handsome, spirited animals.

From our twentieth century point of view, none of the Szechwan cave artifacts can possibly be more interesting than the images of human beings. Several of those in the Smithsonian collection represent servants. One fragment shows the hand of a cook resting on

a fish which he is about to prepare for food. (Pl. 5, *b*; No. 345078.) In these figurines servants invariably wear simple hats; some of them have smiling countenances. (Pl. 8, *a*, *c*.)

Another instructive figure is that of a seated man (the head is missing) playing a flute. (Pl. 6; No. 341342.) That this was not the only musical instrument known to the early Chinese is evidenced by a second fragment which shows a hand strumming a lute. (Pl. 5, *a*; No. 342200.) The writer saw one lute of this kind in Suifu in 1930 and there are several on exhibition in the Imperial Museums at Peiping.

That the builders of the Szechwan caves were devotees of the theater is at least suggested by one figure, evidently that of a clown or a comedian. (Pl. 7, *b*; No. 345077.) The left eye is half closed, while the other is wide open. The face is contorted; the mouth is drawn out of shape and the tongue protrudes. A bit of plaster adheres above the right eye, but we find nothing to indicate that the entire face was whitened. On the Chinese stage to-day it is customary for clowns or fun makers to whiten themselves around the eyes, and one is led to wonder if the same custom prevailed in Szechwan nearly 2,000 years ago.

A second possible stage figure is the *niao yah* character, a strange human being having large tusks and a long tongue hanging down his chest. (Pl. 7, *c*; No. 341403.) The Chinese say that this character occurs frequently in local theatricals; that he is very fierce, and that he has been known on the Chinese stage for hundreds if not thousands of years.

Chinese history and literature contain much evidence that the inhabitants of the middle kingdom admired beautiful women. And we may assume that the people who constructed the Szechwan caves were equally discerning, for the cave artifacts include many fragments of female figurines. A number of heads in our collection show undeniable beauty and unquestioned skill on the part of the artist. Some of these heads wear earrings; others have jewels or similar ornaments on their hats, just above the forehead. In most instances, the features are rather dimly indicated, but there is a smile in each case and the eyes and nose are distinctly Mongolian. In this they resemble present-day Chinese women, and according to Chinese standards at least, both grace and beauty are recognized in the figures. All of them portray slender women. (Pl. 7, *a*, No. 341393; pl. 8, *b*, No. 342179; pl. 9, No. 341336.)

A possible exception to this latter statement is the remarkable little head shown in Figure 14 (No. 342199). Like the others, it was molded; unlike the others, it is solid. It is small, measuring only $1\frac{3}{4}$ by $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches. The nose is wide, thick, and low; the chin is

double—the mark of a well-rounded figure. The face wears an engaging smile and dimples lie just beneath the surface. Earrings hang from the ears. But the most interesting thing is that the bangs, indicated by incised lines, are combed straight down over the forehead and clipped off just above the eyebrows. This same style of coiffure—bangs combed straight down—is still very popular among young women and girls in Szechwan Province, and probably all over China. Apparently it has persisted 2,000 years.

Not only do the figurines in the collection before us tell much of character—at least the artist's conception of what character should be—but they also provide information as to the nature of both masculine and feminine dress in the days

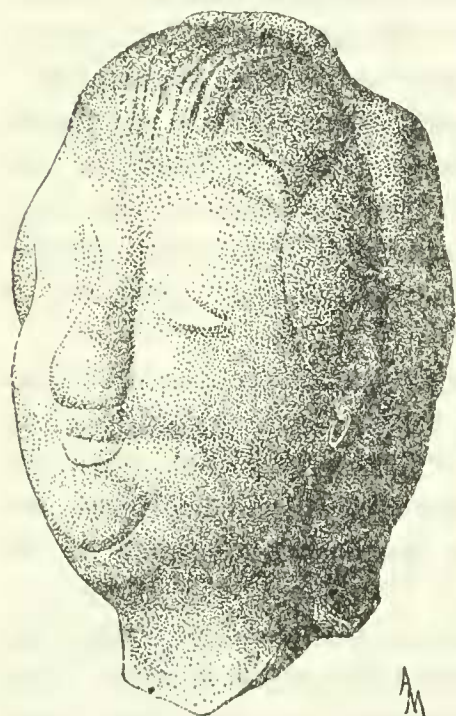


FIGURE 14.—Head from a small figurine

when the caves of Szechwan Province were under construction. One fragment (No. 341405) shows the method of attaching a sandal. Loops rise from the extreme toe and heel and from each side near the proximal ends of the first and fifth toes; through these loops passes a single cord, supported by a strap across the instep, which is exactly the manner of tying the common straw sandal worn to-day. Here again we have evidence that some customs have changed but little in Szechwan during the last 2,000 years.

Plate 10 (No. 342178) represents a servant with broom and dustpan. The latter closely resembles the bamboo dustpan, or *ts'o gi*, used in almost every Szechwanese home, urban or rural, at the present time. Farmers often employ large ones, attached to poles, as a means of carrying fertilizer and other stuffs. The resemblance between that on the clay image before us and those in use to-day is so close that there is little doubt that the latter are survivals of an early type of Szechwan dustpan.

A man with hands folded in the wide sleeves of his long gown is shown by the fragment pictures in Plate 11 (No. 342177). Gowns with long, flowing sleeves were in use in China centuries before the Christian era and they are still being worn. It is a common practice in West China to use the ample sleeves as muffs. The hands, folded inside, are comfortably warm even on the coldest winter days.

Most of the clay images in the present collection were made in half molds and joined together while still moist. Externally, the figures

show no retouching except along the sutures, where careless scraping, usually, has removed superfluous clay from the seam. As might readily be expected, the inside in every case is left rough—just as the modeler completed his pressing and gouging. The plastic clay was pressed into the irregularities of the mold; the excess hastily removed with a blunt, flat-faced instrument. There was no attempt at smoothing. It seems not unlikely that, before casting, the molds were first dusted with dry clay.

The “flute player” (pl. 6) and the little head with the double chin (fig. 14) are exceptions to the above statement. Both are solid, not hollow; the former at least was made in a half mold and finished flat at the back.

Among the vessel fragments shown in Plates 12 and 13, use of the potter’s wheel is evidenced, we believe, by the continuous striations inside and by the nature of the flat bottoms. We would emphasize, however, that we are not positive these vessels were wheel made.

One of the most common artifacts in the Szechwan caves is the earthenware coffin. It has often been found in place, sometimes containing human bones. More frequently broken pieces of the coffins can be seen strewn over the floors of the caves. Almost all the caves have coffin niches, but in some cases the coffins are merely cavities chiseled in the stone and fitted with stone lids. Some caves have places for several coffins, indicating that they were used by families. Two coffins are sometimes found side by side, evidently for the burial of a man and his wife.

We have already referred to the fact that there are collections of artifacts from Chinese Han dynasty graves in the Field Museum, in the public museum at Chengtu, and in the Imperial Museums at Peiping. The objects in these collections so closely resemble those herein described that one can scarcely avoid the conclusion that the “mantsu” caves of Szechwan Province are really Chinese tombs made during the Han dynasty and possibly during the early years of the Three Kingdoms. This conclusion is emphasized by the fact that many of the carvings and artifacts reflect customs or represent implements that were in use by the Chinese 2,000 years ago, many of which have persisted until the present day. The “mantsu” caves, with their characteristic contents and ornamentation, seem very much at home in the Chinese culture but in a strange world among the aborigines of West China. We know of no primitive tribe that now makes and uses artificial caves or artifacts such as those found in Szechwan Province. Further, the Rev. Thomas Torrance has informed the writer that on top of a hill on the edge of the Chengtu plain, typical graves of the Han dynasty period occur, while along the sides of the same hill Szechwan caves may be seen.

and that in form of construction and nature of contents the two are alike.

While Chinese inscriptions are rare in the caves of Szechwan, there are Chinese characters in one cave recording the joint ownership by two Chinese, and in another giving the date of the cave as 103 A. D.⁶ Moreover, Han dynasty coins are found in previously undisturbed caves.⁷ The above facts indicate that the caves can not possibly antedate the Chinese.

The burial customs of the Chinese have had a long history and evolution. In the earliest times men and women were killed and buried with their dead leaders so that their souls might accompany those of the deceased and serve them in the land of shades. The history of the Cheo dynasty (B. C. 1122-255) gives several instances when the living were buried with the dead, a custom probably confined to the upper strata of society. We note in this history (ninth book, sec. 33, p. 4) that when the emperor, Ch'i Huang Gong, was buried, his two wives and many others in the palace were interred with him, a total of several hundred people. Again, in an account of the death of Chin Muh Gong (twelfth book, sec. 47, p. 16), it states that 177 people, in addition to three high officials, were buried with him and that the populace sorrowed because of the death of these three nobles. A third instance (fourteenth book, ch. 55, p. 19) tells of an official who ordered that his favorite wife should be killed and buried with him, but whose sons refused to carry out his instructions. In book 18 (ch. 70, p. 12) we read of an emperor who took refuge in the home of a farmer after being defeated in a revolution. The farmer, with traditional hospitality, presented his two daughters as wives for the Emperor. But even this magnanimous gesture did not conquer his melancholy. When he hanged himself shortly thereafter the two women were killed and buried with him.

Farther on in the history (nineteenth book, sec. 75, pp. 19-20) we read the sad story of King Wu, who had a daughter whom he loved dearly. As evidence of his deep affection, it was his custom to divide any good food he had, sending half to his daughter. She misunderstood this, thinking he was esteeming her lightly and giving her only the remnants from his table. Humiliated, she committed suicide. In preparing for her burial, the King ordered the construction of an artificial pond in the center of which, on a little island, he placed the grave, surrounded by a wall. A tunnel led from the mainland, under water, to the grave. People gathered out of curiosity to witness the funeral, and when some of them went

⁶ Journal, North-China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, vol. 41, pp. 68-69, Shanghai, 1910.

⁷ Ibid., p. 69.

into the passage, the King had them shut in and allowed them to perish there so they would accompany his daughter into hades and there be her servants.

These, and other instances that could be mentioned, show that in China, as in other parts of the world at a much later date, it was customary between two and three thousand years ago to kill and bury human beings with kings, nobles, and others of the upper class. With them were also buried fowls, dogs, weapons, jewelry, money, and other objects. At a later date images of wood and straw were substituted for the living. During the Han dynasty unglazed burnt-clay images were used. By the time of the Tang dynasty (A. D. 620-907) the images were generally glazed. People had also begun to burn paper money (it was believed that burning transformed it into real money that could be used by the departed souls in hades) instead of placing actual coins in the tombs. This custom of substitution spread until it included all the diverse offerings, animate and inanimate, formerly interred with the deceased. Burials in the Szechwan caves were accompanied by clay images which differ in no appreciable degree from those found elsewhere in Chinese tombs of the Han dynasty and of the Three Kingdoms. For these reasons it seems quite evident that the Szechwan caves are of Chinese origin and that they can not be earlier than the Han dynasty.

In China to-day paper money and paper images of people, domestic animals, houses, and many other things are burned during the funeral ceremonies. It is believed that, through burning, these paper figures are transformed into real people, houses, money, etc., for use of the departed souls. Chinese widows rarely remarry, for the simple reason that they hope after death to rejoin their late husbands in the other world.